

I see you, You see me

How pleasant, This feeling

The moment, You hold me

I missed you

I'm sorry

William

Before: 5:37 AM

The alarm doesn't go off for another two hours, but I'm already awake. I always am. I swing my legs over the bed, bare feet hitting the cool concrete. The first thing I do is check the locks: front door, balcony, even the kitchen window that doesn't open. Three times each.

I make coffee in my mother's chipped ceramic mug—blue, with sunflowers painted around the rim. The coffee is too strong, bitter enough to make my jaw clench, but I drink it anyway. It's the only thing that makes the static in my head quiet for five minutes. On the kitchen counter, Lego's Wednesday flowers sit in a mason jar: sunflowers, same as the mug. He left a sticky note on the stem, scrawled in his messy handwriting: Don't forget to water the succulents! I'll check tomorrow :) I trace the edge of the note with my thumb. Lego is the only person I let in these days—small, bright, loud, a living reminder that there's still color in the world. I'm terrified I'll ruin him, too.

The publisher's email glares at me from my laptop, open on the dining table: We need raw. The reclusive genius angle. Your fans eat that up. I hate the words. Hate that they see me as a brand, not a person. I rehearse the rules in my head, for the hundredth time:

No flash. The last photographer blinded me with it, laughed when I flinched.

No surprise shots. I don't want to be captured mid-breakdown, mid-memory, mid-human.

If I say stop, he stops. If I say leave, he leaves. No questions.

I stare at the covered canvas in the living room. I draped the cloth over it three months ago, the day my father sent me a photo of his new wife standing in my mother's garden, holding a bouquet of roses. The painting is a mess of dark blues and charcoals, a hollow black figure at the center—my mother, my father, myself, I don't know. I can't bear to look at it. Can't bear to finish it. The doorman calls. "Mr. Jakrapatr? The photographer is here."

My hands start shaking. I spill coffee on the counter. I stand there, coffee dripping onto the floor, and wonder if I can just lock myself in the bathroom and pretend I'm not home. But Lego's sticky note stares at me, and I know I can't. I walk to the living room and stand by the window, back to the door. The city spreads out below me, a sea of glass and steel. I feel like a stranger in my own skin, my own apartment. A prop.

The words are simple, but they don't feel like a brand. They feel like a name. I turn. He's not what I expect. No crisp blazer, no expensive camera with a lens as long as my arm. Just a guy in a faded black shirt, scuffed white sneakers, messy black hair falling into his eyes. His camera bag is slung over his shoulder like he's carrying a backpack, not a tool. When he holds his camera, it's not like a weapon—it's like a lifeline. I want to snap at him. The space is mine. But his smile is genuine, not patronizing. He doesn't push. He just nods. When I mention my mother, his face softens. I believe him. I don't know why. He asks to see the painting. My throat tightens. I want to say no. But he's looking at me like he knows it's not just paint, like he knows it's all the things I can't say.

Something cracks in my chest. I don't know what. We stand there, side by side, looking at the painting. He doesn't touch it. Doesn't touch me. Just stands there, quiet. I tell him about my mother. About quarantine, the hospital, the screen that told me she was gone. About my father, the new wife, the garden that wasn't mine anymore. I don't mean to. It just spills out, like water from a broken glass. He doesn't pity me. He just listens.

Then he tells me about his own father. How he was kicked out at 18, how he slept on park benches, how he met someone who made him believe he wasn't a waste. I stare at him. I'm used to people looking at me like I'm the broken one. I forget everyone has cracks. He asks me to sit on the rug, close my eyes. I do it because I'm tired, because his voice is soft, because I don't have the energy to say no. I think I'll just rest my eyes for a minute. But then the static in my head goes quiet, and the next thing I know, I'm waking up.

He's sitting on the floor a few feet away, camera in his lap, not taking photos. Just watching me.

I don't argue. I ask him to stay. It's the hardest thing I've said in years. He says yes. We drink coffee, He laughs, loud and unapologetic. The apartment doesn't feel empty.

The door clicks shut behind him. I stand there for a long time, listening to his footsteps fade down the hallway. The apartment is quiet again, but it's not the same quiet. It's not hollow. It's not lonely. I stood in the empty living room, looking at the painting I'd been hiding from. The black figure in the center seemed less like a void and more like a question mark.

The apartment air, usually a comforting blanket of turpentine and lavender, felt thin, stretched. Est's scent, a faint, clean musk, still clung to the cushions where he'd sat, a ghost in my sanctuary. My fingers, stained with cerulean and umber, twitched. I stared at the blank canvas. It mocked me, a vast, white emptiness reflecting the one in my chest.

The ceiling above my bed is a blank canvas, the kind I can't bring myself to paint on. I stare at —while the hum of the city filters through the windows, distant and irrelevant. Quarantine taught me to tune it out; my mother's death taught me to fear it. Every car horn, every laugh, every siren is a reminder that the world keeps turning even when yours stops.

He had left hours ago. Four hours, thirty-seven minutes, and twelve seconds, to be exact. I'd counted the seconds, each one a tiny pinprick of... what? Curiosity? Annoyance? Something else, something unfamiliar and sharp, pricking at the edges of my carefully constructed isolation.

My phone, resting on the side table, vibrated. The screen lit up, a message from Lego.

"You survived?" Lego's text blinked, a digital lifeline.

I picked it up, my thumb hovering over the keypad. "Barely." A humorless puff of air escaped me. "He saw me differently." I typed, then deleted.

I hesitated. How did I explain the way Est had looked at me, not with pity or judgment, but with an almost fierce understanding? How did I articulate the sudden lightness in my chest when he'd spoken of his own pain, his own abandonment? It felt too fragile to put into words. The words felt heavy, even typed.

The word hung there. Connection. A foreign concept, a dangerous one. I'd built walls around myself, brick by careful brick, for three years. And Est, with his quiet questions and his unflinching gaze, had somehow found a crack. The confession feeling absurd.

I closed my eyes, remembering the warmth of the sun on my face, the feeling of Est's presence, quiet and steady.

Lego's next message was a series of emojis: a wide-eyed face, a heart, a thinking face.

My breath hitched. The question I'd been avoiding. The question that made my stomach churn and my hands tremble.

Lego's reply was a simple, "Good."

Good? My therapist would say it was good. My mother, if she were here, would gently guide me towards it. But my own instincts screamed danger. Connection led to abandonment. Trust led to pain. I knew this. I'd lived it. Yet, a small, insistent voice whispered. What if it doesn't?

I put the phone down, the conversation echoing in the quiet room. My gaze drifted back to the blank canvas. Est. He was alive. Warm. Stubborn. Here. And he had seen me. Not just the reclusive artist, the agoraphobic hermit, but William. The broken, grieving, terrified man beneath.

My hand reached for a brush. Not the fine, delicate ones I used for Lego's portraits, but a broad, stiff one, meant for sweeping strokes. I squeezed a dollop of charcoal grey onto my palette, then a streak of deep indigo. How did I paint someone who made me feel so... exposed?

I saw his face in my mind's eye: the messy black hair, the curious tilt of his head, the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed. That laugh. Loud. Unapologetic. Alive. I hated how much I wanted to hear it again.

My brush touched the canvas, a tentative stroke. The grey spread, a shadowy outline. I wasn't painting a portrait. Not yet. I was painting a feeling. The feeling of a wall crumbling. The feeling of a sudden, unexpected warmth in a cold, empty room.

I worked, lost in the rhythm of brush on canvas, the scent of paint filling my lungs. Hours passed. The light shifted, painting the room in hues of orange and purple, the same colors that had bathed Est's face as he talked, as he listened, as he made me feel... seen.

My phone vibrated again. I ignored it, my focus entirely on the canvas. The image taking shape wasn't Est's exact likeness, but rather the impression he'd left: a vibrant energy, a deep understanding, a hint of vulnerability beneath a confident exterior. The winter sky of my own eyes, reflected in his.

The message notification flashed again. From Est. My heart lurched. I put down the brush, my hand trembling. This was it. The first message since we'd exchanged numbers. The first step into the unknown. I picked up the phone, my breath held tight in my chest. Three years. Three years I'd hidden. From conversation, from confrontation, from the messy, terrifying work of being known. And now this.

I read the message. Once. Twice. A third time, each word landing like a gentle hand on my chest.

Est: Hey.

My throat tightened. Now? After all the walls I'd built, all the reasons I'd given

myself to stay hidden, he just...appears? My fingers hovered over the keyboard. What did I say? I'm scared. I don't know how to do this.

But the image on the canvas, still wet with paint, seemed to pulse with a quiet energy. The grey and indigo of my fear, yes, but also the unexpected vibrancy of a new color, a hopeful green, pushing through.

I typed, my fingers moving without conscious thought.

The written words felt like a truth I desperately needed to believe. I stared at the message, a strange mix of terror and exhilaration surging through me. My heart hammered against my ribs. What if he saw through it? What if he saw the fear, the brokenness, the agoraphobia that chained me to this apartment? What if he saw me, truly saw me, and decided I was too much? Too damaged?

The thought sent a cold dread through me. He would leave. Everyone left. My mother. My father. They all left. I pressed my palms against my eyes, willing the fear away. My mother's voice, soft and gentle, echoed in my mind. Be kind, William. Treat others well. She'd always encouraged me to reach out, to connect. With Lego, with the world.

I remembered Lego, thirteen years old, a whirlwind of bright eyes and boundless energy, barging into my quiet world after an art class my mother had forced me to attend. He'd brought life, laughter, and a steady presence that had helped me navigate the awkwardness of adolescence. He'd helped me open up, even if just a little. And Est. He felt like another Lego, a different kind of catalyst, but a catalyst nonetheless. He had seen the raw, unvarnished truth of me, and he hadn't flinched. He had shared his own pain, offered his own vulnerability.

My phone vibrated again.

Est: Do you want to talk?

My breath caught, The thought was a cold, sharp shock. My carefully constructed lie, shattered. The outside world. The noise. The judgment. The crushing weight of it all.

My chest tightened. Panic began to coil in my stomach. The blank canvas, still waiting for its portrait of Est, suddenly felt impossibly far away. My hands started to shake. He was waiting. He was offering. And I was trapped. Trapped by the fear that had been my constant companion for three years. Trapped by the knowledge that stepping outside, even for him, felt like tearing a piece of myself away.

My eyes landed on the half-finished portrait of Lego, mid-laugh, sunlight catching their hair like spun silk. Lego, who had always pulled me out of my shell, gently, patiently. And Est, who had seen the darkness and still offered light.

I took a shaky breath. This was it. The moment of choice. Retreat into the familiar, suffocating safety of my apartment, or take a terrifying, exhilarating step towards something new.

Me: Hi

I hit send, the words a desperate plea. A lifeline. Let him come to me. Just for now. Let him bridge the gap, just a little longer, until I could find the courage to bridge it myself. The apartment air, once thin and stretched, now pulsed with a new kind of tension. A hopeful, terrifying kind of tension. The silence that followed stretched, each second an eternity. Had I pushed him away? Had I asked too much? Had I confirmed his suspicions that I was indeed too broken?

My brain's stuck on a loop of Est's laugh, the way his messy black hair fell into his eyes when he adjusted his camera, the soft, unhurried click of the shutter that didn't feel like an invasion. I pace the living room, bare feet sticking to the polished concrete. The city hums outside, distant as a lullaby, but it doesn't quiet the static in my head. This is new. I'm used to lying awake replaying my mom's last hospital call, my father's smug text, the way Lego's smile falters when I snap at him for being "too loud." Tonight, it's all Est.

Why can't I stop thinking about him?

I've spent three years building walls. Three years letting only Lego get close, and even then, I kept parts of myself locked away—parts that hurt, parts that were messy, parts that might make him leave. But Est walked in, talked about his own dad kicking him out, sat with me in the quiet, and suddenly the walls feel thin.

My hand shakes when I paint his eyes. Dark, warm, the kind that don't look away when you're talking about the things that break you. I remember the way he looked at me when I told him about my mom, like he wasn't just listening—like he was feeling it, too. I step back after an hour, my shoulders aching. The painting isn't perfect. The line of his nose is a little crooked, But it's honest. It's him.

Finally, I type what I'm actually thinking, raw and unfiltered, before I can chicken out:

Me: Can I call you?

I hit send. My hands shake so bad I almost drop the phone. I stare at the screen, waiting for the three dots to appear. Waiting for him to say no, to say he's busy, to say he's not interested in the messy, reclusive artist who can't stop overthinking. I set the phone down, stare at the painting again. Too much like him. But I didn't cover the canvas. I didn't turn it to face the wall. I left it there, wet and imperfect.